



# Maricopa County Animal Care & Control

## Possession Aggression Behavior



### ***MINE!***

Does your sudden appearance in the kitchen at your dog's mealtime elicit a glare and a growl?

Does a gift of rawhide or marrow bone send your usually mild-mannered canine diving under the nearest coffee table while snarling, "Grrr, mine!"?

If these scenarios sound familiar to you, your dog is suffering from Canine Possession Aggression (CPA), also known as food or object guarding.

### ***The trouble with kibbles***

In most cases of CPA, the dog no longer views you as the provider of good things, but rather as the scoundrel who might relieve him or her of hard-earned treasures such as meals, treats, chew toys or, in some instances, forbidden objects such as shoes and gloves. If you remove these items as a punishment when he growls, it will only serve to further convince your dog that his suspicions about you were right all along.

### ***Make a date with your dog - for dinner***

How often have you heard people say, "Leave the dog alone while he eats"? While it probably makes sense to keep toddlers away from Shep at mealtime, a dog can get an inflated sense of himself if left alone while he eats from puppyhood on. After all, in a dog or wolf pack, the alpha or top dog gets to eat his fill first, uninterrupted. Instead, family members should be present while the dog eats - starting when he or she is a puppy. From time to time, it is a wise idea to approach the bowl and add a little something extra - some scrambled egg, a broken-up biscuit, a bite of turkey hotdog or string cheese.

### ***Bowling him over***

If you have an older dog who has already perfected his "Cujo Eats" imitation and it isn't safe to approach his bowl, a different approach is needed.

*Step One* is to do away with his food bowl entirely for a week or two. Shep will be dining out of your hand, just a few kibbles at a time.

*Step Two* marks the return of the food bowl - but it should remain empty until the handler passes by and drops a few kibbles in it. After those are eaten up, drop small handfuls into your dog's bowl at one- to three-minute intervals until the whole meal has been consumed. By now your dog should be practically begging you to approach his bowl.

*In Step Three*, put a semi-filled bowl on the floor and, as you pass by, drop in a few better-than-kibble tidbits. On your next pass by the bowl, add the remaining kibble.

*Lastly, for Step Four*, put a full food bowl on the floor as your dog holds a sit-stay. Release him with a cheery "okay." Then, once or twice a week, call your dog away from his bowl during mealtime and reward him with a tasty tidbit for coming to you. Using your "sit-stay," "wait" and "take it" commands with the dog will make it absolutely clear to Shep who owns the kitchen and the tasty morsels in it.

Each of these steps should be undertaken for 10 to 14 days at each meal before going on to the next step. While you are grappling with a food guarding problem, your dog should wear a leash at mealtimes as a safety measure, but don't use it to correct your dog unless you are in jeopardy of being hurt. Since guarding behaviors seldom happen in a vacuum and can often signal other problems in the dog-handler relationship, a basic obedience course is highly recommended to underscore handler leadership to the dog. Finally, if you experience any backsliding, return to Step One. Slow and steady wins this contest of wills!

### ***Next Issue: MINE! Part II - Object Guarding***

### ***MINE II***

While out walking Bosco the beagle, you scan the sidewalks and streets with skills honed from years of

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living with an expert garbage monger. As you pass the local butcher shop, the man at the counter offers you some beef marrow bones, but you decline. You're almost home free when a tennis ball bounces across your path. In one fell swoop, Bosco seizes it in his mighty jaws and growls, "Mine!" Food guarding, a form of Canine Possession Aggression (CPA), object guarding, the act of aggressively protecting toys, chewies (especially rawhide and beef marrow bones) and stolen objects such as shoes, underwear and human food.

*Why does a dog see the need to protect an item from his family members?* Because he thinks they are going to take it away! They've done it before, haven't they? As a puppy, Bosco roamed the house investigating his environment by picking up everything he could with his mouth. If they caught him in the act, they bellowed "No!" and removed the prize from Bosco's clutches. Every time he found a treasure, it was snatched away. Before long Bosco upped the ante with a growl, then a snarl, and often progressed to a full-fledged bite.

## *Down in the mouth*

Your dog should be used to having his mouth touched, so that when you wish to remove something from it, you won't get bitten. Start from puppyhood on - brush his teeth, play with his flews, open his mouth and inquire, "Anybody in there?"

For dogs who have specific problems with items such as rawhide, purchase a foot-long retriever stick. Hold on to one end while the dog chews the other. Bosco may not enjoy this as much as hiding under a table with it, but in time he will get used to your presence and relax.

## *The big switcheroo*

It is important for the dog to view his handler as the provider of all good things. You can accomplish this by tightly controlling his environment. Keep all but a few chew toys off the floor and take the others out only when you wish to play. Make sure you offer the play time-only item with a command such as "Take it". When you tire of the game (you, that is, not the dog), tell him to "Drop it." Give him another item in exchange, then pick up the first object and put it away. To make a sweeter deal for Bosco, give him a "better"

item in exchange for dropping the first. Find out what those better items are by composing a hierarchy of things your dog enjoys; include food, toys, treats and activities. If tennis ball retrieving, for instance, is third on your dog's list, reward him with liver (number two) for dropping the tennis ball. If he indulges in a bit of garbage from the street, command him to drop it and trade up to his tennis ball.

## *On the wrong rung?*

In theory, anyone higher up the pack-order ladder should be able to take whatever he wants from those further down. Since the dog should be on the bottom rung, any family member should be able to take anything from him. In reality, dominant dogs have a hard time believing that children are above them on the ladder. In many households, the dog believes his rightful place is on the rung between Dad and Mom, if not higher. If this is so in your home, enroll your dog in a 30-day "tough love" leadership program to reclaim your rightful role as leader of the pack.

*If your dog's problems are years in the making or are so serious that you are afraid of him, it is imperative to work with a dog trainer or applied animal behaviorist.*

*He or she can carefully assess the situation and design a protocol tailor-made for you and your dog.*